

In the woods

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The almost true story of a residual ghost.

Chapter 1-Appraisal

(Emphasis on 1st person P.O.V)

Where am I? I feel I've been walking for hours on a jagged path, illuminated by the bright moon. The patch of forest up ahead appears to be a clearing.

I emerge from behind a small tree that has grown dangerously close to a mossy cliff. A full moon projects its image onto a blue body of water in the distance. I sit down and study the illustration below letting my legs swing loosely off the edge. The landscape below curves and dives into the earth. The swaying leaves that



surround me, intertwine with the waves, kissing the sand below.

The view shifts heavily into stillness. I can't remember when I rested last, and I remove my shoes. Soon my whole body feels gripped by the wilderness. I gently lie back on the cool slab of rock and observe. The gentle, sharp breeze cools my head.

A wild circlet of stars blankets the sky. Every star separate and unaware, glistening freely. The wonders and oddities of stars, and other life flow through my head as naturally as the waves upon the sand. As I try to catch one moving or blinking, I feel ageless. The lapping waves reach up the beach less and less until they can barely be heard from up here. Then the wind falls below earshot. My surroundings share a rare silence. My skin tingles.

A deep low echo breaks the quiet, rattling my bones. I peer down off the steep edge, a landing of sand and speckled weeds layered with a thin gradient of dark shadows wraps around the cliff face. I pick up my shoes by their laces and drop them off the cliff, a few seconds later a thump sound indicates they made it to the bottom. Lowering my legs over the edge, my hand tightens onto the rocky wall as I feel for a lower footing. The sound of my thumping heart amplifies as a thick droning echo reaches across the forest. My hand numbs as my pounding heart penetrates the palm of my hand. I exhale smoothly and lower my shaking hand onto a bulging contour of the cliff. The hushed music of the vegetation around me grows clearer as I lower my feet down to the ground at last.

The sand weaves through my toes as the chilling breeze cures my warm blood. The far side coast is scored with sandy paths that wax and wane. The line where the water and the beach combine, and curves sharply. My eyes are drawn to the line course of the landscape as it connects to a row of dimly lit greens, above them is a streak of misty air that quickly dissipates into the sky. The sight is puzzling briefly, leaving as fast as it came.

The water swells in tandem with the wind and conducts the forest in a flowing song.

My feet sink into the milky sand, causing calm ripples in the water to expand.

A bright light flashes just below the smoke trail. I turn and the light flashes again. Knee deep in an unknown lake, I stare off to the left at a darkened wall trying to catch the odd light beaming through the trees. Somehow it seemed, the reflection absorbed the moonlight like a hungry bear swallows its fish.

The surface of the water renders a glowing aura above the water. Critters make their presence known, scurrying up trees and through bushes. More black smoke billows from above the strange light playing with the tree line. Midnight crawls into the shadows and infects them with darkness. I move steadily through the water carefully trying not to disturb the still atmosphere of the night. The yellowish light in the distance piques my interest. I make my way back to the shore heavy and vulnerable to the wind gusts. The source of the light beckons me towards it.

I pause before the soft sand converts into dense forest and ponder what I will do about the lack of light; I have no intention of turning back, as long as any path could be "back". The change in the air from the forest is startling, the darkened trees seem to block me from entering. I slip my shoes over my wet feet and enter the dark abyss, taking with me only the thought of the moonlight as a place of safety.

2-That doesn't belong

Some twigs crunch and leaves flutter somewhere in the distance, followed by a

heavy snap of a branch. Visualizing the disturbance to be an animal dashing somewhere through the debris, pursued by a bear. An unnatural stench seeps through the air, causing me to choke, and my eyes to blur. I suddenly lose balance when my foot travels farther than anticipated and rough bark scrapes past my hand. Where is that smell coming from? I pan my surroundings for any sign of the bright ember. My surroundings are absent save for the infinite darkness that has swallowed me whole.

When I continue, using my hands as guides, a dense school of foliage brushes my left forearm. A spooked critter rushes away, I follow the sound of displaced leaves behind it as the wind pushes through my damp jeans. A chill runs down my back making me shiver.

The hissing of two large trees plays east of the bushes near me. I walk towards them blindly; the utter darkness is difficult to navigate. My stride is interrupted by a loud crunch of nothing close to the sound of a broken twig. The crack and buckle of stress emulates hard plastic or glass. I kneel on the cold forest floor and begin to brush through the invisible debris.

A high-pitch howl resonates from several directions. The wispy air fades suddenly, and a cascade of flapping wings flee the over-arching branches. A faint heavy pant stops me from sorting through the glass, and I lower my body to a crawl position. The bushes unexpectedly shuffle violently, as a monstrous exhale warms the hair on my arm. My eyes close as tight as possible and my joints dissolve underneath my skin. The air empties my lungs like a vacuum. He moves closer, sensing my cage of paralysis. The giant creature raises itself on its hind legs and emits a deep gurgling growl. Suddenly, it bellows out a pulsating roar that

deafens the flow of the forest rattling my organs. My ears ring as my breath is stripped away in fear. Suddenly, the bitter beast surrenders; briskly descending to all four hulking legs. Still growling and grunting, the beast grows distant with each bass pounding step into the black forest walls.

I slowly exhale, relieving as much pressure as the breaks on an eighteen-wheeler. My tense skin flows with adrenaline, my legs wobble like jelly. My ears are blasting with the beat of my heart. Half of me wants to get the hell out of this forest before king grizzly comes back. The other half is curious and determined to find out just where the mysterious smoke was coming from. I just have to guess where to walk next.

3-Mud

I look down, still quivering at the knees, and try to spot the piece I had stepped on. I begin feeling around in the dirt and my hands are met with a small cold object. I quickly snatch the item from the ground, it feels brittle and sharp in my hands. Carefully, I alter its reflective shell to capture the small glint of moonlight, revealing a yellow reflective tint. The man-made shard seems to be new; it could not have been lying here for long. The rest of the headlight is broken up in pieces around me, some crunch under my feet. The row of bushes behind me

nonchalantly sways with the trees, watching my next move. The wind picks up and wisps the forest into a cold laughter, carrying echoes of wailing metal bolts through the canopy above, passing through the forest like a scythe. I stand motionless, listening to the droning cry, as if it'd never stop. The groaning metallic whine draws me deeper into the forest.

I work my way up a narrow hill, dodging rocks and bushes as best as I can along the way, carving a path through this dark maze. The strange sound gradually gets louder, as I inch to the left side of the trail, sensing a steep drop. There's no way to tell how high I am, instinctively I skid my shoe across the dry ground, launching an array of pebbles off the grassy knoll. I listen for the rocks a moment, wondering if they'll never reply with the rough depth at the bottom. Moments later, several splashes are heard bubbling up through the bottomless pit. My mental picture of my surroundings dramatically demotes itself into a feeling of hopelessness.

I turn back to head farther up the trail, cautiously, keeping track of the ledge. I reach for a trunk to pull myself further up the hill, grabbing one of the two branches split from the same trunk. I grab one side, using my right hand as a hook on its rough skin. I shift my weight into my left side and swing myself around the tree. My right foot lands on what sounds like leaves, and then sinks in further. The suction sound of the ground consumes my foot. My leg shakes and wiggles aggressively but will not budge. My hand, still wrapped around the cold bark of the divided tree pulls hard followed by a series of dry cracking sounds, which snap through the forest interrupting the distant groaning again. The tall, dead tree fractures itself and loses a foothold. All at once a tremendous avalanche emits a

shockwave, imitating an enormous boulder plunging down a nearby, concealed hill, smashing all the debris in its wake as the birds flee in fear. Blood rushes to my legs as the mud encases me in thick cement.

The dry tree snaps easily, my arm falls loose with it and launches me straight into the deep pit, this mud is the worst kind- perfectly saturated with moisture. My clothes are quickly soaked and stuck with patches of dense clumps. I try to regain my balance again, and hunch over with my arms stretched out to stay standing. Then the sinking feeling sets in very quickly: The mud swallows half my body in an instant, and I can't get loose. The sludge compacts itself at an impressive speed against my chest hindering my ability to breathe. The mud screeches at me, like a squealing pig, pleading for me to stay stuck forever, but I refuse. I desperately look around in the blackness for an anchor to escape as wind raises the heckling banter of the forest.

A thick dirty branch lays barely visible, half covered in wet substance. I pull the heavy round piece of wood closer, latching on to it with both hands and heave it up above my head. I slam the heavy branch down, feeling the vibrations go all the way down my arms. The Long Branch produces a low thud sound as it contacts solid ground. Good. I repeat the action, tossing the Long Branch after I swing it around and slam it down as hard as I can. This time hitting the ground on my right side, it thumps against the ground, much closer to my body. The mud sits packed in around me, denying me to navigate easily. I keep my eyes set on where the large branch hit adjacent to me. I struggle to turn, boldly forcing my way towards the nearest bank. I take in fast shallow breaths under the crushing packed dirt.

The forest is silent, the odd disturbance has ceased, and the forest watches me intently. Howling midnight air insults my dirty, wet clothing, as the stars spill their beams towards me, looking like distant beady eyes, as the stifling mud filled crater firmly clings onto my clothes. My reach feels painful, my breath is stunted. The muck resists when I pull my right foot out. Half my body drops to the ground, I struggle to pull the rest of the way out of the mud, tugging and kicking through the pain of fatigue and siphoned breath.

I stop for a moment and peel the double heels of mud off my feet. My clothes stagger themselves with clumps of heavy paste. My head rings with the nauseous stench that still writhes through the air. The leaves and bushes around me flutter and applaud my torture.

I lead off through a mass of entangled branches knit together by multiple trees, small branches tug at my clothes and scratch my face. Silent and determined I continue resisting my aching bodies' cries for retreat.

Walking with a determined stride, my shoulders force their way between two tall rocks squeezed together. My head is struck, and I collapse to the ground, my back against a cold face. Numb to the bone, the coldness of the wind delivers its last waves to finish me off. The alluring texture of the trees around me warbles in my sight.

The forest loses its wall of darkness and seems to develop a subtle sepia color, it grabs my vision and turns me towards a light in the distance. A yellow light seems to get closer, with a sharp pain following it. I grab my side and lay opposite of it. My whole body seems tense and injured, my clothes seep a blood red color in the new light as if red paint had been spilled over me.

An awful scene spawns below, a small clearing chopped down by a large, demolished steel carcass, flaming in the distance. I feel a bitter twinge and sink into the cold ground. Everything goes dark as my head pulses, my thoughts do not feel as if they are mine, my whole body shrinks on itself becoming unfamiliar, I feel exposed, and my eyes blur and tinge into an unsettling contrast and recede behind my eyelids. The images in the dark curtain of my mind turn into the view of my body, lying motionless against an upright rock wall. My heart starts thumping out of my chest, but it is too distant for me to hear.

The entire scene of a mangled vehicle lying destroyed just below a gapped guardrail comes into view. The front end is wrinkled like a ball of paper, leaking pools of poisonous liquids onto the burning ground. Shattered chips from crushed trees and clumps of disturbed earth lie scattered around the clearing.

I drift towards the scene getting the same experience and differential distance between my legs as if I am walking. Suddenly this scene is...very familiar. Where am I? I feel like I've been walking for hours.

The end.